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# Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic

*Summary*

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions, is the first report on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. Covering the period from 1 March 2011 to 15 November 2013, it provides information on grave violations against children committed by all parties to the conflict in Syria.

The ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has an alarming impact on children. The present report highlights that the use of weaponry and military tactics that are disproportionate and indiscriminate by Government forces and associated militias has resulted in countless killings and the maiming of children, and has obstructed children's access to education and health services. Government forces have also been responsible for the arrest, arbitrary detention, ill treatment and torture of children. Armed opposition groups have been responsible for the recruitment and use of children both in combat and support roles, as well as for conducting military operations, including using terror tactics, in civilian-populated areas, leading to civilian casualties, including children. The report also stresses the disappearance of many children. All parties to the conflict have seriously hampered the delivery of humanitarian assistance in areas most affected by the conflict, in particular across conflict lines, including besieged areas. The report also highlights that children in Syria have experienced a high level of distress as a result of witnessing the killing and injuring of members of their families and peers, or of being separated from their family and/or displaced.

The present report notes that the country task force remains constrained by serious security and access limitations that present a challenge to the effective monitoring, verification and reporting of grave violations against children inside the Syrian Arab Republic. The report also contains a series of recommendations to halt violations and increase the protection of children affected by the armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.

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# I. Introduction

1. The present report, which covers the period from 1 March 2011 to 15 November 2013, is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolutions 1612 (2005), 1882 (2009), 1998 (2011) and 2068 (2012), and provides information on grave violations against children committed by parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.

2. Access and security issues in the Syrian Arab Republic posed serious limitations to the reporting of grave violations against children and high risks for victims, witnesses and monitors. Consequently, the United Nations country task force was able to independently monitor and report on a limited number of cases inside Syria. The information in this report is based to a large extent on interviews conducted by the United Nations, including numerous accounts from Syrian refugees. Multiple accounts of victims and witnesses, both adults and children, corroborated the overall trends documented in grave violations against children. The information in this report is indicative only of the scale, the scope and the gravity of grave violations committed against children in Syria.

# II. Political and military developments

3. Amid expressions of popular discontent over political and socioeconomic rights, civilian protests erupted in Dar'a in March 2011, in response to the alleged torture of children accused of painting anti-Government graffiti on public buildings. Following the violent suppression by Government forces,[1] demonstrations spread to other cities.

4. Alongside President Bashar al-Assad's announcement of reforms in April 2011, civilian-populated areas were shelled in military operations. The discovery of arms in the Umari mosque of Dar'a in March 2011, security forces firing on demonstrators in the city of Homs, and the assassination of the Syrian army general Abdu Kidr al-Tallawi, as well as two of his children, in April 2011, further fuelled the escalation of armed violence. In August 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed by army deserters in Turkey as an umbrella for various armed factions. In October 2011, the Syrian National Council, a coalition of opposition groups, which in November 2012 became part of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly referred to as the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC).

5. National, regional and international efforts to broker negotiations to halt the violence have been unsuccessful so far. On 23 February 2012, the United Nations and the League of Arab States appointed Kofi Annan as Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on the Syrian crisis. However, a ceasefire, agreed to on 12 April 2012, failed to hold. The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) was forced to suspend its activities by August 2012. Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed Joint Special Representative of the United Nations and the League of Arab States for Syria.

[1] Throughout the report the term "Government forces", unless specified otherwise, includes the Syrian Armed Forces, the intelligence forces and associated militias, including the Shabiha and the popular committees/National Defence Forces.

6. From mid-2012, the violence escalated across the country. The Syrian Armed Forces used air strikes, heavy weaponry and cluster munitions on civilian-populated areas controlled by armed opposition groups. Pro-Government militias, initially known as the Shabiha, were reportedly armed by the Government and began operating alongside the Syrian Armed Forces. Community self-defence groups known as the popular committees were formed by pro-Government communities to protect neighbourhoods from armed opposition groups. Integrated under a national structure called the National Defence Forces early in 2013, they remained under the command of local national security agencies. In 2013, Government forces largely withdrew from the Kurdish areas. Syrian Kurdish armed groups, including the military wings of the Democratic Union Party (PYD),[2] took control of several of these areas in the north-east.

7. As of mid-2012, armed opposition groups had strengthened their control over territories in the northern, eastern and southern governorates, with increased access to weaponry, including through attacking Government installations. Improvised explosives were used throughout the Syrian Arab Republic against Government forces, resulting in civilian casualties, including children.

8. Despite repeated attempts to form a unified military entity, armed opposition groups increasingly fragmented into various military opposition alliances. FSA itself remained divided despite efforts by its Supreme Military Command and aligned brigades retained separate identities, agendas and commands. Radical ideologies increasingly characterized some of the armed opposition with the presence of foreign fighters and radical groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (in early 2012), which formally announced its allegiance to Al-Qaida in April 2013. By 2013, the landscape of parties had completely changed, with increased presence of Al-Qaida-affiliated armed groups, including Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, and a proliferation of armed groups with varying command structures, political and military objectives and tactics, combined with fluidity of front lines and hostilities between armed groups themselves.

9. The humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate; by early October 2013, there were 6.5 million people displaced and in need of assistance inside the Syrian Arab Republic, including approximately 3 million children, and over 2.1 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, including 1.1 million children. All Palestine refugee camps in Syria have also been affected by the conflict. At least 50 per cent of Palestine refugees in Syria have been internally displaced and large numbers have fled Syria.

## III. Grave violations against children

10. Although the present report covers a period of almost three years, it describes incidents of violations in the context of various phases that illustrated the Syrian conflict. In its early stages, violations were committed largely by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, which led to the listing of the Government forces,

[2] PYD is a political party led by Saleh Muslim and Asia Abd Allah. Associated Kurdish militias are the Popular Protection Units (YPG) for men and (YPJ) for women, and the internal security forces "Asaysh" (APK). These troops are associated with the Supreme Kurdish Committee (DBK) and are led by the security committee that reports directly to DBK.

including the Syrian Armed Forces, the intelligence forces and the Shabiha militia in the annexes to my annual report on children and armed conflict (A/66/782-S/2012/261) for patterns of killing and maiming of children and for recurrent attacks against schools and hospitals and protected personnel. As the conflict intensified and the opposition became more organized, an increasing number of violations committed by FSA-affiliated groups were documented, leading to the listing of FSA in the annexes to my 2013 annual report on children and armed conflict (A/67/845-S/2013/245) for the recruitment and use of children. In the same report, the Government forces were also listed for grave sexual violence against children. At the end of the reporting period, the proliferation of armed entities continued to pose serious challenges to identifying perpetrators of violations and to humanitarian access to affected populations. Known perpetrators of grave violations against children include the Syrian Armed Forces; Syrian intelligence forces, such as the Syrian Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, the National Security Bureau, the Political Security Directorate and the General Intelligence Directorate; Government-associated militias such as the Shabiha; the popular committees (later formalized under the National Defence Forces); Syrian Kurdish armed groups; FSA-affiliated groups; Jabhat al-Nusra; Ahrar al-Sham; ISIS; and other independent or unidentified armed groups.

## A. Recruitment and use of children

11. Armed opposition groups recruited and used children, both in support roles and for combat. While no information was available on the recruitment of children by Government forces, they were responsible for the arrest, arbitrary detention and torture of children for their perceived or actual association with the opposition, and for using children as human shields.

12. Throughout the reporting period, the United Nations received consistent reports of recruitment and use of children by FSA-affiliated groups. The FSA Code of Conduct of August 2012 did not mention or prohibit the recruitment and use of children. However, monitoring and verification activities indicated that it was not conducted as a policy or systematically. Interviews with children and their parents indicated that the loss of parents and relatives, political mobilization and peer pressure from families and communities, contributed to the involvement of children with FSA-affiliated groups. Many boys stated that they felt it was their duty to join the opposition. The absence of age-verification procedures or command order prohibiting these acts also enabled child recruitment. In addition, participation of children seems to have often been facilitated by an elder male relative. For instance, in 2011, an FSA member from Homs governorate claimed that there were many children in his group, including his 15-year-old son. Although children were trained in using weapons and knives, the decision to arm a child was made on an individual basis. Various armed opposition groups had different rules on the role of children, and the age at which boys were given military training and permitted to carry arms or participate in attacks. A 12-year-old boy from Idlib city, for example, claimed he had been turned down from joining his brother in FSA in 2012 owing to his age.

13. Boys aged 12 to 17 years were trained, armed and used as combatants or to man checkpoints. For instance, a 15-year-old boy reported having been recruited in April 2012 by FSA in Tall Kalakh (Tartus governorate), and having participated in military operations. After having been caught in a Government ambush, he fled the

area and left the group. Also indicative was the case of a 16-year-old boy from Homs, who reportedly joined FSA in 2012 as a combatant. In March 2013, his family reported to the United Nations that he was still fighting with the group. Two boys, aged 16 and 17 years, were reportedly treated in a makeshift hospital in February 2012 in the city of Aleppo after fighting under the command of FSA. FSA also used children as cooks, porters, cross-border smuggling of arms, lookouts, spies and messengers, as well as to clean weapons and prepare and load ammunition. For instance, a 17-year-old boy from Al Qusayr, Homs governorate, was trained, given a weapon and used to assist civilians trapped or wounded during shelling, and to bury the dead. Cases were also documented of boys and girls being used by FSA in cross-border and cross-line medical evacuations for the delivery of medical supplies to field hospitals and to assist emergency and trauma health services, which put them at high risk.

14. Cases of recruitment and use of children by Syrian Kurdish armed groups were documented in particular towards the end of the reporting period. Reports of boys and girls aged 14 to 17 years associated with Syrian Kurdish armed groups in Al Hassakeh governorate in support and combat functions were documented and verified. Children have mostly been used to man checkpoints and transfer information and military supplies, but they have also been trained to participate in combat. A 17-year-old boy stated that he had joined Syrian Kurdish armed groups in July 2012 to protect his neighbourhood in the border town of Al Qamashli (Al Hassakeh governorate). He claimed that he had received training and later had participated in military operations and guarded checkpoints. Allegations were also received of children associated with Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, but no cases could be verified at the time of writing the present report.

15. Of particular concern were cases of recruitment or attempted recruitment of children within refugee populations in neighbouring countries. The majority of incidents were related to recruitment by FSA-affiliated groups or Syrian Kurdish armed groups. The lack of education or job opportunities and peer pressure were identified as key factors leading to the recruitment of refugee children.

16. The United Nations did not receive reports of children having been formally recruited by Government forces. However, Government forces, including the Shabiha militia and the popular committees/National Defence Forces, reportedly intimidated and seized young males, including those under the age of 18, to join their ranks at checkpoints and during raids in pro-Government and contested areas. In one instance in July 2012, a man reported to the United Nations that the Syrian Armed Forces had tried to recruit his 16-year-old son while they were passing a checkpoint in Deir ez-Zor governorate.

17. The United Nations also gathered reports of the use of children as human shields during Government forces ground operations, particularly ones that were carried out in 2011 and 2012. For example, during Ramadan in 2011 in Kafr Nubl (Idlib governorate), Government forces reportedly used civilians, including at least eight children, as human shields, threatening to kill the children if the opposition did not surrender; the fate of the eight children remains unknown. In April 2012, the Syrian Armed Forces reportedly invaded Deir Balbi (Homs governorate) and forced women and children into the street. As FSA groups approached the town, civilians, including children, were reportedly forced to line up and stand between the tanks and soldiers of the Syrian army to dissuade FSA groups from attacking. In March

2012, in Homs city, the Syrian Armed Forces reportedly abducted children from schools and marched them in the streets with loudspeakers announcing their arrival and informing potential attackers not to fire as they had children with them. In August 2012, in Kuferzita village, Hama governorate, the Syrian Armed Forces reportedly arrested a large number of children, both boys and girls, mainly between the ages of 10 and 12, and used them as human shields. Children were also forced to face Government tanks, sing pro-Government songs and organize a demonstration in favour of the President of the Syrian Arab Republic under threat that they would be arrested or detained. The Syrian Armed Forces reportedly abducted approximately 20 of these children, who were released a week later in a state of shock and with marks of torture.

**Detention of children for alleged association with armed groups**

18. Children have been arrested, detained, ill treated and tortured in detention facilities, including illegal facilities, by Government forces in large-scale arrest campaigns, particularly in 2011 and 2012. Children have been arrested for their or their relatives' actual or perceived participation in demonstrations or support to armed opposition groups. The United Nations collected reports of children who were arrested in their homes, schools and hospitals and in the streets, and at checkpoints in Dar'a, Idlib, Homs, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor and Damascus governorates. Children arrested in 2011 and 2012 reportedly transited through multiple detention facilities, and were often held in intelligence forces detention facilities, sometimes for months.

19. Some detention facilities, such as schools, hospitals, private homes and checkpoints, did not meet the international minimum standards on juvenile justice. Multiple accounts of children and adult witnesses indicate that the majority of children were held in the same cells as adults, and that children as young as 11 years old suffered ill treatment and acts tantamount to torture to extract confessions or humiliate them or to pressure a relative to surrender or confess. Ill treatment and acts tantamount to torture reportedly included beatings with metal cables, whips and wooden and metal batons; electric shocks, including to the genitals; the ripping out of fingernails and toenails; sexual violence, including rape or threats of rape; mock executions; cigarette burns; sleep deprivation; solitary confinement; and exposure to the torture of relatives. Reports indicate that children were also suspended from walls or ceilings by their wrists or other limbs, were forced to put their head, neck and legs through a tire while being beaten, and were tied to a board and beaten. For example, a 16-year-old boy reported being arrested by the Syrian Armed Forces in March 2012 and detained with approximately 20 other children. Children and adults were beaten with metal bars, their fingernails were pulled out and their fingers were cut; or they were beaten with a hammer in the back, sometimes until death.

20. Access to children detained was largely denied to the United Nations and humanitarian actors. In addition, family members of children detained often did not receive any information on their whereabouts.

21. While there is limited information available, allegations were received that armed opposition groups also controlled detention facilities in which children perceived to be pro-Government suffered ill treatment and torture.

## B. Killing and maiming of children

22. At the time of writing the present report, the United Nations estimated that more than 100,000 individuals had been killed, including more than 10,000 children, and many more injured since March 2011. The United Nations gathered reports on children who were injured during hostilities due to heavy shelling and aerial bombardments. In some cases the injuries consisted of multiple traumas caused by burns, shrapnel wounds, the severing of limbs or spinal cord injuries. The limited treatment options sometimes required amputations, which in turn led to infections, paralysis and/or permanent disabilities.

23. Throughout 2011 and 2012, children as young as 11 years old were among anti-Government protestors who were reportedly injured or shot dead by Government forces in Dar'a, Homs, Idlib, Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Deir ez-Zor governorates. In one case, on 12 December 2011, a 16-year-old boy participating in a demonstration in the Old City of Homs was shot in the back by a Government sniper and subsequently paralyzed. A witness at a demonstration in Idlib governorate in June 2012 claimed that he had taken two boys aged 12 and 17 years, who had been shot at by Government forces, to a hospital, where they had subsequently died.

24. The targeting of and military activities in residential areas led to the killing and maiming of children. For instance, in July 2011 a 14-year-old boy carrying bread out of a bakery was reportedly killed by a sniper in Homs governorate. A father reported that, in August 2011, in the Khaldieh area of Homs, his seven-month-old son was shot in the neck by a sniper positioned at a Syrian Air Force checkpoint opposite his home. The killing and maiming of children by Syrian Armed Forces and Shabiha elements was also reported in the context of ground operations, including during house-to-house searches for opposition members. Government forces also reportedly used indiscriminate weapons with disproportionate force. From July 2012 on, consistent reports described the use of cluster munitions and ground-to-ground missiles or "barrel" bombs on civilian areas. Thermobaric bombs were used in Aleppo city during 2012, which destroyed entire blocks of residential buildings. In addition, numerous reports of the use of expanding bullets against children were received.

25. In 2012 and 2013, Government forces blockaded villages and cities and conducted intensive shelling and air strikes, killing and maiming children in Al Hassakeh, Aleppo, Damascus, Dar'a, Hama, Homs, Idlib and Latakia governorates. In one incident on 26 September 2013, a 10-year-old girl was killed and her four brothers, aged 4 to 10 years, were maimed during the bombing of Hayya village, Aleppo governorate. In another incident in September 2012, in Khirbet Al Ghazaleh (Dar'a governorate) heavy shelling by Government forces hit a group of fleeing women and children, reportedly killing two children and severely injuring two children. During the battle for Al Qusayr (Homs governorate) in May 2013, witnesses consistently reported indiscriminate, disproportionate shelling and the use of snipers, against fleeing civilians. Government airstrikes repeatedly targeted internally displaced persons (IDP) camps near the Turkish border; for example, on 25 June 2013, Bab al-Salam camp. At the time of writing the present report, intermittent hostilities, including mortar shelling and airstrikes, continued in and around the Palestinian camps of Yarmouk, Husseiniyah, Sbeineh, Barzeh, Jobar, Qaboun, Khan Eshieh and Dar'a.

26. Children were also the victims of mass killings allegedly committed by Government forces in Dar'a, Hama, Homs and Tartus governorates, mostly in 2012 and 2013. On 25 May 2012, in Al Houleh district (Homs governorate) over 100 individuals, including at least 49 children, were reportedly killed; most were shot at close range. The United Nations spoke with an eyewitness who stated that his wife and three children (two boys aged five and eight years, and one girl aged three years) were killed in front of him, while his 10-year-old daughter was hit by a bullet and one son was still missing. Children were also reportedly among the dozens of victims of mass killings in the towns of Al Bayda and Baniyas (Tartus governorate) on 2 and 3 May 2013. In several of these instances, children appeared to have been killed in their homes, shot at close range.

27. During the first two years of the conflict, the majority of incidents of killing and maiming of children were attributed to Government forces. However, mainly owing to increased access to heavy weapons and the use of terror tactics, armed opposition groups increasingly engaged in such acts during 2013.

28. Children were the victims of mass killings in Latakia governorate that were committed by a coalition of armed opposition groups allegedly including Ahrar al-Sham, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar and Suqour al-Izz during the so-called Barouda offensive against Alawite villages on 4 August 2013. At least 18 children, including boys and girls under the age of 10, were killed and an unknown number of children were maimed. Most children were shot in their houses or while trying to flee with family members. In some instances, civilians reported that armed opposition groups tried to relocate civilians before launching operations. In most incidents, however, FSA-affiliated and other armed groups conducted military operations in densely populated areas, leading to the displacement and civilian casualties, including children. Armed opposition groups reportedly used snipers, mortars, rockets and improvised explosive devices in residential areas.

29. Armed opposition groups also engaged in the summary execution of children. Lack of access, including for security reasons, has prevented the United Nations from systematic documentation. Trends are believed to be much higher than the number of recorded cases. For instance, in 2011 in Damascus governorate, FSA elements reportedly killed a 16-year-old boy, who had allegedly been coerced to work with the Government when his father was detained by Government forces. The United Nations also received reports of children killed by Jabhat al-Nusra, including, a 16-year-old boy who was shot dead in April 2013 in Al Hassakeh governorate. Also in Al Hassakeh governorate, a 14-year-old boy was reportedly shot dead by elements of Syrian Kurdish armed groups associated with PYD during a demonstration of another Kurdish faction.

30. Children were also caught in cross-fire between Government forces and armed groups, or between armed groups themselves. For instance, in August 2013, in an attack by Jabhat al-Nusra in Al Hassakeh governorate, three boys, aged 15 to 16 years, who were manning a checkpoint of Syrian Kurdish armed groups associated with PYD, were severely injured. In May 2013, a 13-year-old girl was injured in the cross-fire between Government forces and FSA elements while attempting to flee Al Qusayr.

31. According to credible information, a number of mortar attacks in and around Damascus killed at least 9 children and injured at least 43 in November 2013. For example, on 11 November, four children and a bus driver were reportedly killed and four children and two superintendents were injured after a mortar hit a school bus outside a school in the Bab Sharqi area of Damascus.

32. In addition, the Syrian Ministry of the Interior has shared with the United Nations its records on children who allegedly were killed or injured by armed opposition groups in various governorates. According to those figures, at least 130 children were killed, including in shelling, and by gunshots and summary executions, and at least 118 children were injured between 10 November 2011 and 22 December 2013.

33. The United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, in its report on the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus on 21 August 2013 (A/67/997-S/2013/553), concluded that chemical weapons were used on a large scale, resulting in numerous casualties, particularly among civilians, including many children. The report also stated that surface-to-surface rockets containing the nerve agent sarin were used in Ein Tarma, Mo'adamiyah and Zamalka in Rif Dimashq. In addition, the United Nations received indications of further use of chemical weapons, reportedly causing child casualties in Aleppo, Homs, Idlib and Damascus governorates, but was not in a position to confirm these allegations or to identify perpetrators.

## C. Sexual violence against children

34. Sexual violence in relation to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic is believed to be largely underreported owing to fears of reprisals and social stigmatization, combined with the lack of safe and confidential response services. Sexual violence against girls and women, or the fear of sexual violence, was reported as one of the reasons for which families were internally displaced or fled Syria.

35. The United Nations documented sexual violence against children while detained by Government forces in formal or informal detention facilities. Sexual violence was reportedly used to humiliate, harm, force confessions or pressure a relative to surrender. Incidents of sexual violence or threats of sexual violence were perpetrated mostly by members of the Syrian intelligence services and the Syrian Armed Forces against persons perceived to be part of or affiliated with the opposition. Sexual violence reportedly included electric shocks to, or burning of, the genitals, and the rape of boys and, in a few instances, of girls. Boys in detention were also sexually mocked and humiliated, and threatened with the rape of family members. A 16-year-old boy from Idlib governorate, for example, reported that, in March 2012, he was arrested with five other boys between the ages of 13 and 15 years at a checkpoint near his school and detained in a centre run by intelligence forces. The boy reported that he witnessed his 14-year-old male friend being sexually assaulted and then killed. In another example, the United Nations gathered information on the medical treatment of two boys, aged 15 and 16 years, who had been arrested in Douma, Rif Dimashq, in July 2012, and detained for three months in the Air Force Intelligence Centre in Damascus, where they were allegedly sexually assaulted.

36. The United Nations also received reports of allegations of rape, including gang rape, and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls, including in the presence of relatives, by Government forces, in particular at checkpoints or during incursions and house searches of families perceived to be pro-opposition. Individuals in Idlib governorate reported that they or their neighbours had housed or helped a number of young female rape victims fleeing from Bab Amr district (Homs

governorate) following ground operations by Government forces in August 2012. In another documented case, the Syrian Armed Forces were searching a neighbourhood for civilians involved in anti-Government demonstrations in Homs governorate in July 2012, but instead they arbitrarily arrested a 14-year-old girl, detained her over a six-month period and raped her.

37. Allegations of sexual violence by armed opposition groups were also received, but the United Nations was unable to further investigate them at the time of writing owing to lack of access.

38. Gender-based sexual violence and exploitation and the general vulnerability of children displaced within and outside the Syrian Arab Republic to such abuses remained of grave concern and are among the most worrisome consequences of the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict in Syria.

## D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

39. Schools and hospitals have been seriously affected by the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and disproportionally targeted by all parties. Attacks on schools and hospitals, their widespread military use and the targeting of teachers and medical personnel by all parties have severely disrupted children's right to access to education and health services. In addition, indiscriminate Government airstrikes and shelling by armed opposition groups on populated areas damaged or destroyed education and health facilities.

40. As at October 2013, according to Government statistics, more than 3,000 of the 22,000 schools in the country had been damaged or destroyed. More than 1,000 schools were being used as IDP shelters. An estimated 2.26 million children in the Syrian Arab Republic were not attending school or were attending irregularly. More than 52,500 teaching staff (22 per cent) and 523 school counsellors (18 per cent) did not report to work. Approximately 1,615 schools in Syria are operating on double shifts. Access to education for Palestine refugee children has also been compromised. At the time of reporting, only 39 of the 118 schools of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East were operating, some on a triple shift system, while 71 schools were closed, with 8 being used as IDP shelters and another 8 partially functioning, which were also being used as IDP shelters.

41. In 2011, Government forces reportedly targeted schools where students and teachers were believed to be participating in anti-Government demonstrations. Witnesses reported that schools were damaged or destroyed, and many schoolchildren and teachers were arrested at school. Government forces also attacked schools with artillery, and positioned snipers in school facilities in Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Dar'a governorates. In one incident in September 2011 in Al Qusayr, a Shabiha element allegedly shot at a school building from the playground, killing a 15-year-old girl and injuring several children. On 12 December 2012, according to an 11-year-old boy from Daraya (Damascus governorate), his schoolmate was shot dead while running away from Government forces shooting at his school, reportedly killing and injuring more children. At the end of 2011, and increasingly throughout 2012 and 2013, schools were also hit by Government air strikes and heavily shelled, mostly in Aleppo, Dar'a, Hama, Homs

and Idlib governorates. For instance, in December 2012, five children were killed in an air strike on the public school of Al Houleh (Homs governorate).

42. Schools have also been used as detention centres, mostly by Government forces. For example, six boys from Kafr Nabl (Idlib governorate) were reportedly arrested in March 2012 at a checkpoint and detained for 11 days by the Syrian Armed Forces and Shabiha in a local school.

43. The United Nations also received information on the destruction of schools during incursions or raids on villages by armed opposition groups. In February 2013, two schools were reportedly used as military bases by Jabhat al-Nusra combatants in Tall Brak and Al Hol (Al Hassakeh governorate). In May 2013, two schools were reportedly looted by FSA elements in Hama, resulting in their closure and the interruption of classes for about 1,500 students. Additional information on summary executions of teachers, including in front of their students, by radical armed groups was also received.

44. All parties had used schools as military barracks, operational bases, snipers postings or detention facilities, including while children were attending classes, putting them at extreme risk of being attacked. In Aleppo, a primary school allegedly partially used by an FSA group as a base was targeted by Government forces in May 2012, injuring 15 children aged 6 to 12 years. Later in 2012, FSA groups reportedly used two schools as operational bases in Salahuddin area (Aleppo governorate) and three schools as weapons storage houses and military bases in Al Qusayr (Homs governorate), interrupting the education of about 2,100 children. In addition, since mid-2013, ISIS in northern Syria has been attempting to control the curriculum in schools and has set up Islamic schools in which children are reportedly indoctrinated to fight for "jihad".

45. In November 2013, several attacks were reported on schools in Damascus. Mortar rounds reportedly hit school complexes in the Al Dweila, Bab Sharqi and Al Qassa areas of Damascus on 3 and 11 November, respectively, killing children and school personnel. On 13 November, fearing further attacks, the Ministry of Education suspended teaching in these affected areas for three days.

46. According to information shared with the United Nations by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, at least 3,004 schools have been destroyed since the beginning of the conflict and 1,068 schools, which account for 20 per cent of all schools in Syria, have been transformed into shelters, reportedly depriving almost 2 million children access to education. The Government also shared records on 28 attacks on schools and school buses, which were allegedly perpetrated by armed opposition groups between 20 November 2012 and 22 December 2013.

47. Reports indicate that Government forces were the main perpetrators of attacks against hospitals and other health-care infrastructure, mainly opposition-run makeshift health facilities and of threats and attacks against medical personnel. In addition, Government forces used a number of hospitals for military purposes, erecting checkpoints at their entrance, interfering with the work of medical staff, arresting patients and health personnel and posting snipers on their rooftops. Snipers were reportedly posted on the roof of both public and private hospitals in Homs governorate. Reports also indicate that medical personnel and the provision of health care were instrumentalized by Government forces to gain military advantage

over the opposition and deny access to medical care to both combatants and civilians perceived to be pro-opposition.

48. Due to fear of detention, mistreatment or execution by Government forces, opposition health networks established temporary field hospitals in private homes and mosques. Multiple accounts of medical personnel or volunteers working in those facilities indicate that Government forces repeatedly targeted and shelled makeshift or regular hospitals in opposition-controlled areas, as well as ambulances, resulting in patients and medical personnel being killed or injured, but also in damage to medical infrastructure and supplies. For example, on 13 September 2013, the "Al-Nur" field hospital in Yabrud (Homs governorate) was shelled by a Syrian Armed Forces aircraft; at least eight patients were killed.

49. Numerous accounts describe instances where Government forces used health facilities to identify injured opposition members, supporters or their relatives, or denied access to medical care to civilians, including children, perceived to be from opposition-controlled areas. For example, Albir Hospital in Al Rastan, Homs governorate, was repeatedly attacked by the Syrian Armed Forces. In January 2012, the hospital was reportedly surrounded by tanks. Soldiers arrested about 25 persons and allegedly executed them at the hospital entrance. The same hospital was later partially used as a military base by Government forces. in August 2013, the continued presence of military personnel reportedly led to a 70 per cent decline of consultations by patients.

50. Injured opposition fighters and civilians, including children, admitted to Government hospitals in perceived pro-opposition areas in Aleppo, Dar'a, Homs and Idlib governorates were reportedly exposed to arrest, detention, ill treatment and acts tantamount to torture by civilian doctors, and/or elements of Government forces. Reports also indicate that civilians perceived to be affiliated with the opposition were in many instances prevented from crossing Government checkpoints or entering a hospital to seek emergency medical treatment. In December 2011, for example, the Syrian Armed Forces reportedly erected a barrier to control access to Ibn Sina Hospital in Rif Dimashq. Medical personnel also felt at risk of arrest, detention, ill treatment or execution if they did not cooperate with orders to refrain from treating those perceived as pro-opposition. The United Nations also gathered information on arrests of medical personnel for treating civilians perceived to be with the opposition.

51. The United Nations also received reports on instances where armed opposition groups denied medical treatment to injured pro-Government fighters. Misuse of ambulances by elements of the armed opposition was also documented. In addition, it was documented that, on several occasions in 2012, FSA used ambulances in Idlib governorate to cross Government checkpoints.

52. According to records shared by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic with the United Nations for this report, 63 hospitals, 471 health centres and 412 ambulances have been targeted since the beginning of the conflict. In addition, 240 medical staff members allegedly have been killed. The Government alleges that armed opposition groups were responsible for these attacks.

53. According to a report of the Syrian Ministry of Health of July 2013, 60 per cent of public hospitals had been affected by the conflict, including 38 per cent of which were out of service and 22 per cent damaged. In addition, 38 per cent of all

public health centres and 92 per cent of public ambulances were either damaged or destroyed. As at October 2013, ongoing fighting had reportedly forced the closure of 12 of the 23 health clinics providing services to Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic. In Homs, for example, 50 per cent of all doctors were believed to have fled. In the Aleppo area, 36 doctors remained practising, compared to 5,000 before the conflict.

## E. Abduction of children

54. The abduction of civilians, including children, has become a prominent feature of the Syrian conflict. The United Nations received several reports of abduction of children by pro-Government militias or armed opposition groups in exchange for ransom or the release of prisoners, or as pressure on relatives perceived as supporting the opposing party. In many cases, the whereabouts of these children remain unknown. For example, a 17-year-old boy was abducted in Homs governorate by elements of the Shabiha outside his home in February 2013. In another incident, in July 2013, a 15-year-old girl was abducted by armed elements while fleeing with her family from Abu Al Zuhur, Idlib governorate. She was released in exchange for the family's car and money. Approximately 50 children were reportedly among the 200 persons taken hostage by several opposition armed groups during the "Barouda" offensive, which began on 4 August 2013 in Latakia governorate. At the time of writing this report, their location and the groups holding the hostages remained unknown.

## F. Denial of humanitarian access

55. Despite the achievements of humanitarian actors and the continued scaling up of the humanitarian response, access to areas of Rif Dimashq, including Mo'adamiyah, Yarmouk and Hajar Al Aswad, and Al Hassakeh, Al Raqqa, Aleppo, Dar'a, Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Idlib and Quneitra governorates, remained challenging at the time of writing this report. Constraints were mainly due to insecurity, fluid frontlines and checkpoints erected by all parties, as well as administrative impediments. The United Nations has repeatedly called for unimpeded humanitarian access to populations across the country. As at October 2013, an estimated 6.5 million internally displaced people, including approximately 3 million children, as well as hosting communities and refugees from Iraq and Palestine, were in need of humanitarian assistance.

56. Both Government forces and armed opposition groups had been keeping areas under siege for months, thereby impeding humanitarian access to civilians, including children. Several areas in Rif Dimashq, such as Mo'adamiyah and East Ghouta, had reportedly been under siege by Government forces since October 2012, depriving more than 1 million civilians of urgent humanitarian assistance. In addition, the Yarmouk and Sbeineh camps for Palestine refugees had also been sealed off, preventing assistance to affected Palestine refugees. The old city of Homs had reportedly been under siege by both Government forces and armed opposition groups since the beginning of 2012, and no humanitarian assistance had been delivered to the besieged population since August 2012. Also, in Nubbul and Al Zahra' villages (northern Aleppo governorate), more than 35,000 people had reportedly been besieged by FSA-affiliated and other armed opposition groups

including Ahrar al-Sham, Kathaib al-Haq, Nooreldin al-Zenki Brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and deprived of access to basic commodities and humanitarian assistance since the beginning of 2013.

57. The increasing numbers of checkpoints and incidents involving the diversion of humanitarian supplies by all parties to the conflict hampered the regular supply of food and other humanitarian items across the country. Medical supplies entering areas under the control of armed opposition groups had been routinely obstructed by Government forces. Contents of medical kits, including essential obstetric care, life-saving and surgical equipment, were removed at checkpoints, on the basis of the argument that these items could help treat injured opposition fighters. In addition, the Government imposed lengthy bureaucratic procedures for humanitarian personnel, logistics and supplies, including in the delay or non-issuance of visas, permits for armoured vehicles and authorization for travel within the Syrian Arab Republic.

58. According to information shared by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, a set of new measures have been taken recently to facilitate humanitarian access across the country. New mechanisms for granting authorizations have been put in place, including new procedures for dispatches from United Nations warehouses, which are however being implemented on an ad hoc basis. In addition, progress, sometimes modest, has been made in the entry of humanitarian personnel, mobility and deployment of personnel into the country and the dispatch of humanitarian supplies and services, including mobile health units, medical supplies and surgical equipment.

59. The fragmentation of armed opposition groups made it increasingly difficult to negotiate safe access across conflict lines. Jabhat al-Nusra and other unidentified armed groups had routinely attacked humanitarian convoys in the reporting period. For instance, in June 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly looted three humanitarian trucks containing 3,000 food baskets between Al Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor governorate, and Al Hassakeh city, Al Hassakeh governorate, and a truck transporting medicine and vaccines from the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health in Saraqeb near Idlib. In June 2013, four trucks carrying 160 tons of humanitarian assistance were temporarily hijacked and looted by elements of Al-Khandak in Idlib governorate.

60. Humanitarian workers, both national and international, have been intimidated, threatened, arrested, detained, injured or killed. Since the beginning of the conflict to the time of writing the present report, 25 Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteers have been killed, impacting the delivery of essential life-saving supplies and services. On 13 October 2013, seven humanitarian staff (six from an international agency and one national NGO staff), were abducted in Idlib governorate; four of them were released, while the whereabouts of the three others remained unknown at the time of writing. In addition, a total of 17 United Nations staff were abducted in the reporting period. In one incident in May 2013, an armed opposition group under a commander named Abu Hamza temporarily abducted eight United Nations staff members near Aleppo, and stole a United Nations armoured vehicle. As at 31 October 2013, 13 United Nations national staff had been killed, while another 22 remained detained, missing or abducted.

## IV. Advocacy and dialogue with parties to conflict to prevent and halt grave violations against children

61. At the invitation of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, visited Syria twice, in December 2012 and July 2013.

62. The establishment of a functioning monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children to allow a thorough follow-up to the listing of parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic was the priority of her first visit. Subsequently, a United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting was established with the consent of the Government on 6 March 2013. My Special Representative also reached out to both the Government and FSA, calling for their commitment to end and prevent all grave violations against children.

63. On 14 March 2013, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic shared a report on grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic with the United Nations country task force, highlighting measures it had taken to respond to the impact of the conflict on children, including education for displaced children and the rebuilding of damaged schools. While advocating for a formal structure to be put in place to address grave violations against children, the country task force regularly raised its concerns with the Government regarding the scale of violations against children and the need to put in place prevention mechanisms.

64. To develop preventive measures to protect children against grave violations, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic adopted a series of legislative reforms. Law No. 11/2013 entered into force on 30 June 2013, criminalizing all forms of recruitment and the use of children under the age of 18 by armed forces and armed groups, including taking part in direct combat, carrying and transporting weapons or equipment or ammunition, planting explosions, standing at checkpoints or carrying out surveillance or reconnaissance, acting as a distraction or human shield or assisting and/or serving the perpetrators in any way or form. The same law increased the sentence for the crime of rape against a girl under the age of 15. On 2 April 2013, the Government also criminalized the abduction and kidnapping of individuals in the context of the crisis with legislative decree 20/2013.

65. During my Special Representative's visit to the Syrian Arab Republic and neighbouring countries in July 2013, she called for the comprehensive implementation of the new legislation and its application to all parties to the conflict. Furthermore, she advocated that the Government establish a formal ministerial coordination mechanism to prevent and respond to violations against children and to facilitate the sharing of information on grave violations within the Government and with the United Nations. The release of children arbitrarily detained for their alleged association with armed opposition groups was equally discussed with Government representatives of various ministries and was foreseen to be tackled as a priority issue during the first meeting of the interministerial committee on children and armed conflict of the Government. Advocacy on these issues was repeated to the Syrian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs during his visit in New York on 28 September 2013. The Committee's first meeting with the United Nations took place on 12 December 2013. The United Nations has no information on any action taken by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic regarding children detained for alleged association with armed groups.

66. Advocacy to FSA commanders in the Syrian Arab Republic to end the recruitment and use of children in conflict was renewed during my Special Representative's second visit and, in October 2013, to representatives of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Syrian Opposition Coalition) in New York. As with the Government, the situation of the civilian population in besieged areas was addressed, and the United Nations continuously called on all belligerents of such areas to allow humanitarian assistance to people in need. By visiting four neighbouring countries of the Syrian Arab Republic, my Special Representative also gathered a first-hand assessment of the regional consequences of the conflict. With the continuously increasing number of Syrian refugees, the pressure on host countries, in particular on social services, reached critical levels. In all of the four neighbouring countries visited, the number of refugees in urban areas and in camps puts increasing pressure on hosting communities. This raises additional child protection concerns, including lack of education and health care, the risk of child labour, incidents of child recruitment among the refugee population, sexual exploitation and forced marriages of minors.

67. Efforts have also been made by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs to initiate an awareness campaign with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund to prevent violations against children's rights. The United Nations is currently supporting the Ministry of Social Affairs to develop a strategy to prevent and end the association of children with armed forces and armed groups and other grave violations against children. Public awareness campaigns and the integration of mine/explosive remnants of war risk education into the education system are being undertaken, including in partnership with the Ministry of Education. In September 2013, the Government also responded positively to a United Nations request to sensitize State-backed media to avoid displaying children "confessing to being associated with armed groups".

## V. Recommendations

68. The suffering endured by the children in the Syrian Arab Republic since the outset of the conflict, as documented in this report, is unspeakable and unacceptable. Violations must come to an end now. I therefore urge all parties to the conflict to take, without delay, all measures to protect and uphold the rights of all children in Syria. In particular, I urge all parties to:

(a) Respect international human rights and humanitarian law, stop all grave violations committed against children and take all appropriate steps to protect children and other civilians in the course of military operations;

(b) Investigate relevant incidents and take disciplinary measures in line with international standards against individuals suspected of having committed these violations and abuses;

(c) Put an end to all indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian areas and public spaces including the use of terror tactics, airstrikes, chemical weapons and heavy artillery;

(d) Allow and facilitate full unimpeded humanitarian access to all affected populations, including to besieged communities and other hard-to-reach areas, and implement humanitarian corridors and pauses to allow for the delivery of essential

supplies to besieged communities and immunization campaigns. In particular, I urge all parties to the conflict to allow the delivery of medical supplies to all people requiring medical assistance, without distinction, in compliance with common article 3 of the Geneva Convention and its Additional Protocols;

(e) Immediately release abducted women and children;

(f) Cease the military use of schools and hospitals and protect the civilian character of those institutions;

(g) Immediately take all measures to prevent and halt all forms of sexual violence and abuse against boys and girls.

69. As a State party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to its Optional Protocol on children and armed conflict and other core international human rights treaties, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic carries the primary responsibility to ensure the protection of children throughout its territory. I call upon the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to:

(a) Put an end to the killing and maiming of children, in contravention of international law, to investigate these incidents and to make the results of these investigations known;

(b) Make hospitals neutral spaces by ensuring equal access for all patients to hospitals and other medical facilities and to refrain from posting troops inside and in the vicinity of hospitals;

(c) Halt the arbitrary arrest and detention of children, including those detained for alleged association with the armed opposition, release all children detained by any State or parastatal entities on these charges and allow for access to detainees by international monitoring bodies;

(d) Take all necessary steps to facilitate the expansion of humanitarian relief operations and lift impediments that could potentially delay the delivery of humanitarian assistance and goods;

(e) Ensure that all Government-affiliated militias respect international human rights and humanitarian law and put an end to all violations against children, including but not limited to the killing and maiming of children and the recruitment and use of children;

(f) Ensure that the interministerial committee for children and armed conflict meets regularly with the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting to discuss questions related to the protection of children in the Syrian conflict, as well as to devise a framework to address and prevent ongoing violations against children. In this regard, I also urge the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to enter into dialogue with the United Nations with a view to preparing and implementing action plans to end the killing and maiming of children, in contravention of international law, sexual violence against children in detention and attacks on schools and hospitals and their protected personnel.

70. I urge all armed opposition groups to:

(a) Put an end to the killing and maiming of children and other grave violations committed against children, in contravention of international law, to publicly denounce all such violations, and take all appropriate steps to protect

children and other civilians in the course of military operations and in areas under their control;

(b) Investigate and take disciplinary measures, as relevant and in line with international standards, against those elements in their ranks who are known or believed to be responsible for crimes and grave violations against children;

(c) Take steps to prevent and halt the recruitment and use of children under 18 years of age within their ranks, including its clear prohibition in formalized codes of conduct, and engage with the United Nations to develop and implement action plans to this end;

(d) Refrain from carrying out attacks on humanitarian convoys and ensure their unimpeded access to and through areas under their control.